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POPULAR BIBLE STUDY: ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND ITS LESSONS.

*POPULAR
INTEREST IN
BIBLE STUDY
A NEW
PHENOMENON*

THE remarkable growth of interest in Bible study now everywhere evident demands more attention than it is receiving in the religious press. It is not many years since the members of churches allowed their pastors to serve as their vicars in the matter, and, if they concerned themselves in the least with theology, were content with such crumbs of biblical lore as fell from their teacher's table in sermon or Sunday school. It is true that Christian people, then as always, may be supposed to have read the Bible, but, if results are any criterion, in the great majority of cases such reading was desultory and thoughtless. Speaking generally, the fact was that the Bible was consulted, committed to memory, even worshiped; but it was not studied.

Contrast this situation with that in the churches today. The revolt against Sunday-school methods that were satisfactory ten years ago has practically become a revolution. Bible classes—some with very rudimentary methods, it must be admitted—number thousands of members. Bible Study Leagues, Young People's Societies' courses, Reading Guilds, correspondence courses of innumerable sorts, popular lectures—these do not begin to exhaust the evidence at hand pointing to the widespread demand for Bible study among the rank and file of church members. The American Institute of Sacred Literature alone during the past year had ten thousand persons enrolled as students

both individually and in classes. So ubiquitous is the interest that it may almost be said to be a characteristic of the day. To neglect it is to neglect a sign of the times. The rank and file of the churches may not be in advance of their leaders, but they are certainly making new demands for instruction. The present generation has suffered so greatly from ignorant and fanatical interpreters of the Scriptures that it sees clearly that, so far as the Bible is concerned, its only hope lies in a sane and rational knowledge of the biblical teachings.

Those who have carefully observed the currents of church life during the past twenty-five years, and who have kept themselves in touch with theological tendencies, cannot be surprised at the present condition of affairs. In many quarters it has, indeed, been foreseen. For it cannot be traced to any one agency, or to any local causes, and it is peculiar to no country or denomination. Germany and England, France and America, though in differing degrees, have all shared in the movement; while both the great Roman church and all really virile Protestant denominations have felt the same need and in many ways have attempted to satisfy it.

Yet this very universality argues a common cause, and that, too, one not hard to find. Compare the age of pietistic, "commenting" devotion to the Bible with today, and the great difference at once appears: *the supremacy of the historical method*. So long as the Bible was studied for the purpose of establishing doctrines, so long its study could appeal but to the theologically minded. That it was so studied, and that such study was considered the only legitimate method, will appear to anyone who will recall the reception accorded pioneer popular works like those of Stanley in the Old Testament or Seeley in the New. Men thought it as impious to speak of Jesus being historically conditioned as to speak of men as descendants of the lower animals. Religious teachers were bent on sustaining theologies, and the ordinary Christian judged Bible study by its theological fruits.

And then into the midst of it all came the summons, alarming at first, but to every man who was in touch with the thought of his

age full of inspiration: Study the Bible as one studies other literatures; interpret its teachings in the light of the circumstances for which they were intended and out of which they sprang; use historical results to discriminate between the essential and the accidental; in all things hold oneself independent of all dogma, and discover what the biblical writers actually taught, not what they ought to have taught. No student will ever forget the moment when for the first time he realized the full significance of such a summons. Brought face to face with a choice between such a method and the abandonment of some dogmatic position, he who chose to follow the new call suddenly found himself interested as never before in all that pertains to the Bible. It was not merely a new literature, it was a new revelation of God; and in the first flush of his enthusiasm he endeavored to lead others into similar independence and similar appreciation of biblical truth. Hebrew and Assyriology, Greek grammar and ancient history, were no longer of merely scholarly interest. The touch of history that had revived the Bible revived, even when it did not create, a new world of allied interests.

And the fruit of this spirit, diffused by teachers and publications through a quarter of a century in America, we are just beginning to discover. Popular interest in the Bible is the outcome of popularizing historical methods.

There are two suggestions springing from these facts. The first is this: The Christian minister, if he is wise, will recognize this interest and conform to it. It is only a matter of working wisely and along the line of least resistance. It is idle to plead that the minister already has so many imperative duties that he cannot add another. The situation is too critical for such casuistry. Here is a great popular movement in the churches; will ministers direct it, or will they abandon the strategic opportunity and conscientiously but blindly prefer a course of action that, as any sensible minister confesses, leads into a restless activity that distracts quite as much as it edifies?

TWO

SUGGESTIONS:

1. THE

*MINISTER MUST
RECOGNIZE THIS
NEW INTEREST*

The second suggestion is intended for those ministers who recognize the strategic situation and determine to exploit it. It

2. POPULAR is this: Do not make the mistake of believing that
BIBLE STUDY anything short of the true historical method will
MUST BE either satisfy yourself or meet the demands of your
HISTORICAL people. You do not need to be specialists in historical criticism, but you do need to teach the Bible as those who know about its composition, its history, its times. Merely to make pious or "spiritual" comments may for a time interest pious people, but the real teaching of the Bible is not to be gained alone by homiletical ingenuity, religious zeal, or even spiritual insight. The Bible from today forward will interest and inspire in the same proportion as it is studied and taught, not only sympathetically and prayerfully, but also historically. First discover precisely what the inspired writers meant to teach their own times, and then will one see clearly how to apply that teaching to one's own time.